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Scooping the CIA

By Joseph Finder

On the evening that Soviet Communist Party General Secretary Yuri Andropov died in February 1984, Dusko Doder, the Washington Post's Moscow correspondent, deduced what had happened long before anyone in the U.S. foreign or intelligence services did. He telexed the news to Washington, where his editors originally assigned the story (speculative though it was) to the front page. Certain indicators in Moscow had reminded Doder of Leonid Brezhnev's death 15 months before: The lights were burning unusually late at the headquarters of the KGB and the Ministry of Defense; Soviet radio had replaced jazz music with classical. Doder had also received a brief, cryptic telephone call from a well-placed friend in the Soviet government that seemed to confirm his suspicions.

In Washington, however, the Post's editors checked with the Pentagon, the White House and the CIA, and received in every case the assurance that Doder's report was false. Lawrence Eagleburger, then undersecretary of state for political affairs, told the Post that if the story were correct he would have been informed by the embassy in Moscow, and he had not been. The Post then moved the story off the front page to page nine, and captioned it, cautiously, "Unusual Kremlin Activity Raises Concern About Leader's Health." When the State Department cabled this report to the embassy in Moscow, the staff there received it with disbelief and some derision. The Soviets announced Andropov's death the next day at 2:30 in the afternoon.

That a newspaper reporter could "scoop" U.S. intelligence is revealing of how sunning the Soviet Union is with information about its own workings. An observer on the scene who understands the political culture can sometimes detect signals before any official news is broken. In this respect little has changed in the last several decades. On March 5, 1953, Eddy Gilmore, a correspondent for the Associated Press, concluded from watching automobiles filled with doctors and nurses enter the Kremlin and from seeing an unusual number of official cars parked around the Kremlin, that Joseph Stalin had died. J.F.